

BULLETIN 837 Reprinted FEBRUARY 1954

Growing Older

MARGARET BROOKS

CORWELL

EXTENSION BULLETIN

FOREWORD

From all over New York State recently, we've received 166 reports from 166 local leaders of groups who have discussed the topic, "Aging Successfully." The 2861 women who attended those meetings have given us many different ideas about growing older.

Since there is so much interest in the adjustments faced by women who are approaching and passing through the middle years, we felt that a summary of these reports might be welcomed.

The following pages express some of the feelings women have about growing older, and point out some of the adjustments which they consider important. We hope many women will find here that they are *not* alone, and will begin thinking these things through as others are thinking them through. We also hope that women will find this sharing of ideas worth while.

Perhaps, too, this bulletin will help to put the process of growing older into perspective, and will show ways to think about living at any age from new points of view.

(All quotations are from Home Bureau Family Life Leaders' Reports, September, 1950-June 1951)

A publication of the
New York State College of Home Economics
a unit of the State University of New York,
at Cornell University

CONTENTS

Speaking of Gray Hairs.....	4
It's Great to be Young!.....	5
And You Don't Want to Grow Old?.....	5
There's Lots to Learn.....	6
You're <i>Not</i> Alone.....	6
Attitudes <i>Are</i> Important.....	6
Physical Changes <i>Do</i> Occur.....	7
Families <i>Do</i> Get Rearranged.....	8
You <i>Are</i> Needed.....	11
And You're Not <i>Exactly</i> Like Anyone Else	12
Thinking It All Over.....	13
Where to Start Exploring.....	13

GROWING OLDER

MARGARET BROOKS

Speaking of Gray Hairs

SPEAKING of gray hairs...how do you feel about yours? We all think occasionally about growing older, about aging — everyone does. But have you ever asked yourself, "What is aging, anyhow"? That's a good question. What *is* it?

Is it those gradual physical changes, like gray hairs? Is it the look in a bus rider's eye when he stands to let you have his seat? Is it a silent kitchen which not long ago buzzed with activity? Is it a loaf of stale bread bought a week ago that you and your husband can't finish? Or do you think of it when you meet an old friend on the street and mumble to yourself, "My, how he's aged!" Then you walk home, look at yourself in the mirror, grin at your own reflection and say, "You too, old timer!" What *is* aging, anyway?

Stop a minute and consider.

You began aging the moment you were conceived. You were already aging when you were born. When you sprouted your first tooth, you were aging — but everyone gloated over your "growth." When you were ten, you beamed with pride when you weighed more than your best friend but when you were fourteen, pride disappeared when you outweighed her. When you're forty, you begin to avoid the scales altogether,

Somewhere along the line your attitude toward growing and aging changes. You're proud when you have a baby...but you weep when you go to her wedding. You're happy about growing into motherhood, but not quite content to grow out of it.

Aging and growing are funny things. You're happy when you feel you've grown — you're sad when you feel you've aged. Yet aren't the processes part of a whole? Don't both include learning, using past experiences for a fuller and more satisfying present life? The processes aren't too different...but your attitudes may definitely be different.

It's Great to Be Young

It is great to be young. It is true that America pays homage to youth. No one will deny that youth is wonderful. So much of youth helped build America. Youthful enthusiasm and adventurous spirit made—and keep—America a young country.

But do young bodies and youthful enthusiasm necessarily go together? Each one of you knows someone whose courageous and adventurous spirit makes you forget how old he is. Those people who are young at any age are the ones who give us that old saying, “Well, you’re only as young as you feel.”

And people like that are needed. Today there are more people over forty than there have ever been before. America needs people over forty. It needs constructive thinking and perspective. It needs what people over forty can give.

Why then should anyone apologize for being not-so-young? Why should you be tempted to pull out that first gray hair? Why not leave it in and be proud of it? It’s needed—and what’s more, it means you’ve grown!

And You Don't Want to Grow Old?

BUT MAYBE you still don’t want to grow older. Many folks don’t. Why—if it’s true that older people are needed—don’t you feel happier about growing older? Perhaps some of these reasons from different groups of women will help you see why there’s resistance to this kind of growing.

“One of our members, a widow, had just been rejected in a job because of her age...fifty. We really discussed that one.”

“The world is moving faster than ever and we don’t keep up with it. We don’t have time to.”

“We often make things harder for ourselves and for young people. We don’t accept age or make good use of it...we defy it!”

“The ability to learn grows through use...and sometimes we just stop using it.”

“It’s not easy to admit you haven’t accomplished all the things you wanted to.”

Those are a few of the reasons. They’re helped along by society’s attitude toward older people which one group summarized in this way, “We really shelve older people right at the height of their usefulness.”

And society’s attitude includes *your* attitudes, all rolled together. It’s hard to admit, but one of the biggest factors in this uncomfortable feeling about expanding waistlines and double chins is that older people *themselves* feel they’ve lost more than they’ve gained. They face adjust-

ments and new learnings — just at the time in life when they'd like to relax and take life easy. And many of these learnings are *not* easy. So you hear, over and over, "I just hate growing older."

Now, what can you do for those feelings about the first — or hundredth — gray hair?

Here's a summary of the adjustments, or learnings, which you find yourself tackling during the middle years — and how some folks cope with them. They're the most important parts of growing through and beyond the middle years.

There's Lots to Learn

You're *Not* Alone

Everyone feels, at times, a little apologetic, a little frightened, a little wary, and sometimes a little angry about growing older. The women in these groups did too, but after talking it over they realized that they were not alone in their feelings.

"In our discussions of aging, we found that we all have the same feelings and troubles, and we learn from each other different ways to solve problems."

"One lady with nine children explained how hard it was to lose four, through marriage, in one year. Another said it's harder when you have only one or two children and they marry. Much discussion pro and con. But we did agree that it's never easy to get used to children's growing up and leaving home."

"A great deal of interest was shown when we started to talk about living successfully with relatives like grandparents, mothers-in-law, parents, and married children. We all felt that mixing generations in a household is difficult."

"We agreed — unanimously — that trying to keep within a budget, and planning financially for the future, was our most serious strain of everyday living!"

"The greatest problem is the old person who is active, but doesn't want to 'do anything' or who doesn't know how to."

So you see, you're not alone. Many people have been feeling as you do, thinking through some of the adjustments you're facing, trying to learn what you're learning.

Attitudes *Are* Important

Some folks have such a nice outlook on this business of growing older. They're interesting, and fun to be with. What makes the difference between the older people who are fun to be with and those who are just to be endured?

"We agreed that everyone we know who's aging successfully... whom we like... has a real interest in more than one thing. They're useful, giving people, and cheerful too. Financial status seems unimportant to them, whether it's good or bad. We speculated a lot about how you learn to feel that money doesn't matter."

"One lady said that, during this meeting, she'd realized for the first time that she had a nasty habit of feeling sorry for herself — and it made her more and more unpleasant. She vowed to do something about it."

"People who get along with themselves can get along with anyone... the greatest duty you have is to yourself, when you think about it. Actually, all you have to share or to give stems from what is uniquely *you*."

"One woman who always seemed bored said she guessed she had never really tried hard enough to find something she liked."

These quotes express some of the differences among people's attitudes. Actually, when you re-read them, they seem to be attitudes toward life itself.

It's not easy to change life-long attitudes. If you're one of those folks who feel that "everyone's agin you," or that "children these days are little demons" or that "these teen-agers are going to the dogs," you can't change right away. But you can begin by saying, "All right, I do feel that way." Then, after admitting it, ask yourself, "Am I being just? Have I forgotten how I felt when I was younger? Am I making snap judgments because things have changed in the last few years?"

It is hard to look at life in a new way. But you can work at it a little, day by day... trying to find something good that you hadn't noticed yesterday... grinning at something which bored you last week... trying to *see* the tree standing in front of your house instead of taking it for granted because it's always been there... remembering to look closely at your husband or your best friend and to realize how much they really mean to you. Then you begin to get the feeling, in spite of yourself, "Well, growing older can be fun when you're ready for it."

Physical Changes Do Occur

Physical changes do occur... physical bodies always seem to cause trouble. When you're two years old and discovering that the world is full of a number of things, you're scolded because you've pulled every pan out of Mom's kitchen cupboard. But what are you doing? You're trying to learn how to use those things called arms, fingers, and legs. When you're sixteen and interested in that unknown quantity called "boys," you begin to wonder what being a woman really means. Maybe you worry because you're too tall or too short, too fat or too thin. If you

have straight red hair you wish it were curly and black. When you're in your twenties and your first baby comes along, you begin to wonder what this process of birth means to you, to your relationship with your husband, to the baby you haven't seen yet. And then when you reach your forties and fifties, you wonder what all the physical changes will mean — to you as a woman and as a person.

"Our younger members liked the discussion of menopause. They'd been afraid of it. We reassured them (although many of us had been afraid of it too). And, though we'd all known a little about physical aging in women, we were surprised to discover that men go through changes too!"

"It's good to know that menopause is not a disease and does not cause a disease. It's a normal process, like that which happens during adolescence."

"We decided that these physical changes weren't so important as the way we felt about them."

"I can still walk up the hill, but it bothers me when I walk up with someone younger and he asks, 'Am I going too fast for you?' What really hurts is that he is going too fast!"

When you reach the middle and later years, physical bodies continue to be important, as they always have been. Not only because they are changing — for they're always changing — but because they make you look at yourself in a new way. If you understand and accept those physical changes, they're really not difficult. Remember the pimple on your face before you went to a big dance when you were sixteen? Like that pimple, your physical changes are much more obvious to you than they are to anyone else. When you accept them, other people accept them too...or don't even notice them. And life's much more pleasant.

"I spent half my life wishing my teeth were straight. Then I had to have false teeth. They are straight. But I'm still not happy. I want my old ones back. My face looks so different to me now. Guess I'm just hard to please."

Families Do Get Rearranged

When you've spent a good share of your adult life with your family, it's not easy to forsake the fun which comes from being a homemaker and mother. But if you'll look back, you'll remember that there *were* times when you looked forward to leisure time, to doing things you wanted to, to knowing that the children were grown up and on their own. But when you finally reach that day, sometimes life seems empty.

"One of the women wondered what she'd do with those dozens of canned peaches she had in the cellar. And another commented that she'd just realized that her center of living had moved from the kitchen to the living room. We all agreed that it was really more fun to cook for the whole family than just for our husbands and ourselves."

"We're quite convinced that activities with other people are very necessary. But many of our husbands seem to be less aware of that need for social contact."

"Couples have to re-learn the things they like to do together. They're newlyweds all over again."

"We talked about hobbies...and one woman was delighted to discover that she had a hobby but hadn't known it. Most of us found that our hobbies had begun from some everyday routine."

So three new family learnings challenge you when the children leave home...learning to change your homemaking patterns, learning to be husband-and-wife team again, learning to do something which gives you satisfaction, whether it's a hobby, or part-time work, or community service, whatever it is.

But when you think of changes in families during your middle years, you think of other things too...learning to be in-laws, to be parents of children who are parents, to be children of old-aged parents, to be grandparents. You've learned what being a parent means, and you've known what being a child means...but here are brand new roles to learn.

"We have to work at being grandparents, decide what kind we want to be and then be them."

"About taking care of grandchildren...most of us agreed that we ask for it, so we can't complain when our married children seem to think of us as 'baby sitters' only."

"We agreed that older women should keep their hands off married children...but only one of us had a married child!"

"It hurts to realize that your parents are aging. And we realize that it hurts them too. But we did agree that when different generations live together in a family, we should really make definite plans for helping the older members do *important* things which make them *know* they're wanted and needed."

"Everyone makes his own adjustments at each age level. We thought that over for a while and decided it not only means children, but older family members too. Sometimes we don't give our older parents credit for being able to solve their own problems. We even thought seriously about this: would more older people prefer to live in a good home with others of their own age and interests if we, their children, would let

them? And we agreed that we really didn't know. We'd never asked them."

"We should stress the attitude of younger people to older, and vice versa. So many times older folks in the family are unhappy because the younger ones don't understand them, and the younger ones are unhappy because the older ones don't understand *them*. We agreed that children who see love and enjoyment of older people expressed by their parents will grow up with those feelings themselves. And, of course, as parents we have to be real people too...else how will our kids learn that adults can be fun?"

Those are just bird's-eye views of the new challenges within the family during the middle and later years. You can plan to meet those challenges with real thought and positiveness. Or you can plan to sit back and say, "I've done my work. Now let it be done for me. I've finished solving my problems. Now let someone else work on 'em for a while." Which is your approach?

Finally, as you think about family affairs, there are two or three more adjustments that may occur to you.

Having money to live on is important. And this challenge is not always easy to meet. Things do happen. Plans do fall through. Sometimes you have more money than you'd anticipated, and sometimes you have less. You can't always foresee illness, a time when children will need financial help, or decrease in the value of the dollar. But there *are* ways to help yourselves.

Think over the things which you now have to help you, things which folks just a few years ago did not have: social security, pension plans, hospital and medical service insurances, retirement insurances. And think these comments over too.

"We retire too hard."

"Several of our members told how their hobbies had suddenly started bringing in money, and how surprised they had been to find their *fun* worth dollars to others."

"There's a group of people over sixty in our town who've started a business, and are doing well at it too."

"My folks have sold and moved out of their home, and gone to a place where living is cheaper and where there's more for them to do. They love it!"

You *can* do something, no matter what your age. It's never easy to plan ahead...but it's easier now than later. As one group wrote, "Preparedness for financial independence at retirement age begins when you start to work. We agreed. We also agreed that planning ahead was easier said than done. But some of us have done it."

You Are Needed

You know what it means to be needed. A wife and a mother, within a family, always learns how it feels to be needed. Family togetherness is a wonderful feeling, and you never really lose it. But feeling that you're wanted, needed, and valuable to others outside the family is a wonderful feeling too. These middle and later years are the real proving ground for our general all-round usefulness. This is the period during which we either grab the bull of civic and social responsibility by the horns... or let him go.

There are so many different groups, different places, where you are needed. It's true that people *don't come looking for you*. Society in general doesn't *expect* older people to be great contributors. But the need for you exists... and you're happier if you really go out and find where that need for you is.

There seem to be three general approaches to discovering where you're needed. The approach you use depends upon what kind of a person you are.

You may want to continue doing what you've done all your life, to use your skills as a homemaker and mother because you like people. For this kind of energy, there are lots of outlets.

"We started a school for baby sitters."

"We've been planning a cooking school for brides."

"I decided to turn my home into a rooming house, and the young people who live with me are wonderful."

"I'm a cook in a boys' summer camp."

Those are just a few ideas. Other women return to work they did before they were married. Usually they find they have to go back to school for a while, but the results give them satisfaction. Other folks work with young people of any age in community groups (and for this you really have to like and be willing to try to understand young people). A group in one county has begun to work with people in a home for the aged. They report that "it not only has helped the folks in the home find new interests in living, but has helped us too. We've found a new outlook on our own 'old age'."

Then there are other women who've always wanted to accomplish some particular thing, but have never had time. Now they make the time.

"I've started taking a class in night school."

"I've been doing all the things I've always wanted to do... and all the things I've been a little afraid to do."

"My hobby is really getting the attention I always wanted to give it."

"I started writing the history of our family, as best I can remember. My children think it's a slightly crazy idea. But my oldest son told me, 'We kid you now, Mom, but one of these days we'll be awfully glad you did it!'"

"We had enough money to travel. And so we have travelled. It's not only been fun, but it's made my husband and me closer together than ever. It isn't quite the way we'd dreamed it would be — we're both much older. But it's more wonderful because we're finding out things we'd forgotten — or had never known — about each other in forty years of marriage."

Finally, there are folks who, after a full life, just want to relax with a good book or a ball of yarn. That's fine too. It's an art to be able to relax . . . without feeling guilty, without feeling ignored, without feeling left out. And if you can do it, and if you want to do it, go ahead. But be prepared to deal with the concern of those who'll think you feel neglected. The active part of our population can't quite understand those who just want to sit and meditate.

Whatever your approach . . . there is a place where you're needed. You'll find it if you but look.

And You're not *Exactly* Like Anyone Else

Here's a new learning, uniquely your own . . . discovering what life means to *you*.

You are unique. Your experiences have been different from anyone else's. Your outlook on those experiences, your feelings about them, your summary of them, are your own affair. You can, in the final analysis, look on these middle and later years in any way you want to.

Over a period of years, you've drawn some conclusions. You may have accomplished things you never dreamed of. On the other hand, you may have suddenly realized you're *never* going to shake the world, that millions of other people will never know you have lived. You begin to see that the days of relaxation and of settling down that you looked forward to will never happen. It's not the easiest part of living to admit that life's a continual series of problems to be met and then solved.

Occasionally you may look around you and see a complex and uncertain world . . . and here you are, being forced to live longer and longer in it.

Life can look awfully black and glum.

But it can be fun too.

It's up to you. You can say to yourself, after your children have grown and your way of life is different, "That's it. I've had it." Or you can say "That was wonderful. What comes next?"

Thinking It All Over

YOU'VE read here many ideas. You may have been thinking, as this group did, "It's too bad a definite answer can't be given to all our questions on growing older successfully." But this same group, after discussion, added, "But it's good to know that there are many different answers. After you think them through, you have a new perspective on the whole business of growing older."

Some groups did write down a few tentative answers. To these you'll want to add your own.

"Keeping up with the world doesn't only mean being informed about the news. It also means learning new ways to do things and to say things."

"Don't be afraid to be happy...it's easy."

"To age well, a person must live well...that is, adjust to circumstances along the way, keep the machinery 'well oiled' physically, mentally, spiritually. Many of the group likened a human being to a machine which, if fed well and treated well, would last long and perform new miracles. One of the women commented that perhaps 'co-operation' was the oil to use."

"One member of our group, several years ago, kept a notebook of things 'grandpa said and did' that she vows to avoid. We decided that wasn't a bad idea."

"As leader, I tried to help them look at the process of growing up from the child's point of view but found that the majority seemed to have forgotten what it's like to be a child. We agreed to prod our memories."

"Teen-age problems took on a different slant when we'd compared notes and found that we, as parents, could be more helpful. Some of teen-age behavior results from our own...and from our own unwillingness to see young people's points of view."

Now, what are your ideas about growing older? Don't be afraid of them — they're more interesting than you really know.

Where to Start Exploring

AS YOU'VE read through these pages, you've already started to explore...your feelings, your observations, your objections, your unanswered questions. Taking stock of yourself is a good start. If you defy or ignore some of these physical, family, and social changes, you may be spending valuable energy uselessly. No matter what your age, until you've recognized your chronological age, your general feelings about life and its experiences, your physical changes — until you've recognized and accepted them, it may be hard to start exploring.

Now you can explore further. For example:

Look at the people around you whom you like to be with. What kind of people are they? What do they do? What are they interested in? What do they talk about? You might get some ideas about happiness. You might also take a look at those whom you avoid...and find more ideas about happiness.

Every age group is interesting. Just because someone has a wrinkled face and arthritic joints doesn't mean he's a bore. Listen to him. Find out how he feels. One group did say, "We don't know how older folks feel or what they want...we've never asked 'em."

The youngsters you know...how do they feel? What do they like to do? What words do they use? How do they tick?

Do you belong to a group? Perhaps you might use these pages, and some of the questions they bring to mind, as a basis for discussion. If you don't belong to a group...find one. How do you all feel about growing older? If there's "nothing for you to do," maybe as a group you can find something...for individual group members and for the group as a whole.

What does your community offer for the middle and older age people? Ten chances to eleven, you don't know. Maybe you'll find...nothing. And right there, you've found a place where you're *needed*.

Are you wondering or worrying about your health? If you are, find out about it. You may be amazed at your own potentialities. You may find your worries unfounded. If you find something wrong, you can find out what to do about it.

What do you really like to do most? Do it. Capitalize on it. It's never too late to learn. You CAN teach an old dog new tricks.

Those are but a few suggestions. You can fill in the gaps. There are many places to explore. You've learned that waiting for things to be done for you never seems to work. Part of being alive and of liking to be alive is an eagerness to see what comes next...and to make something come next.

No matter who you are, where you are, how you feel...there's something around that corner.

References

IF YOU'D like to read more about this business of growing, here are some good places to begin.

- Cavan, Burgess, and others: **PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT IN OLD AGE**, Science Research Associates, Chicago, 1949. (This tells what kinds of adjustments older people have found they had to make and discusses the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of old age. The language gets technical at times, but it's well worth reading.)
- Elliott, Grace L.: **WOMEN AFTER FORTY**, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1936. (Mrs. Elliott's viewpoint is that, though middle age is but part of the whole of life, there are specific problems at that age. She points out some approaches to solving those problems.)
- Giles, Ray: **HOW TO RETIRE — AND ENJOY IT**, Whittlesey House, New York, 1949. (This is that good, practical book you've been looking for. It contains many concrete suggestions.)
- Gray, Madeline: **THE CHANGING YEARS — WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE MENOPAUSE**, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, 1951. (Written by a New York State woman who asked doctors and others the questions women wanted answered.)
- Havighurst, Robert J.: **DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS AND EDUCATION**, Longmans, Green & Company, 1950. (This brief booklet surveys adjustments to be made at all age levels. It helps put learnings at all ages into perspective.)
- Lawton, George: **AGING SUCCESSFULLY**, Columbia University Press, New York, 1946. (This might be called the "classic" book on aging. You'll find it easy to read, practical, and helpful.)
- Lieb, Clarence: **OUTWITTING YOUR YEARS**, Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, 1949. (This is a much liked presentation of attitudes important to the later years.)
- Lincoln, Miriam: **YOU'LL LIVE THROUGH IT**, Harper & Bros., New York, 1950. (A doctor tells exactly what the woman approaching middle age may expect and destroys a lot of nonsense that has passed too long for truth.)
- National Conference on Aging: **MAN AND HIS YEARS**, Health Publications Inst., Inc., Raleigh, N.C., 1951. (This contains reports of the conference, focusing attention on the problems and needs of our aging population, and exploring ways of solving the problems and meeting the needs, with suggestions for community action.)
- New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Problems of the Aging: **ENRICHING THE YEARS**, Senator Thomas C. Desmond, 94 Broadway, Newburgh, N. Y., 1953. (This report is full of suggestions for life in the later years.)

Rogers, Donald I.: **TEACH YOUR WIFE TO BE A WIDOW**, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1953. (This small book provides information on such subjects as insurance, long-range family financial plans, investments, wills, real estate, and taxes affecting the wife and her family's financial structure.)

Stern and Ross: **YOU AND YOUR AGING PARENTS**, A. A. Wyn, Inc., New York, 1952. (Over 100 real-life stories covering every type of situation give you concrete answers to such questions as: Should you have your parents live with you? What is the truth about old-age homes?)

Stieglitz, Edward J.: **THE SECOND FORTY YEARS**, J. B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, 1946. (Here's a good review of the physical changes in men and women during the middle years.)

Travis and Baruch: **PERSONAL PROBLEMS OF EVERYDAY LIFE**, D. Appleton Century Company, New York, 1941. (This book, long found useful by adults and young people, offers a good frame of reference from which to think about aging at any time of life—from birth to death.)

Finally, here are three pamphlets that groups have found most helpful and which they guarantee you will enjoy:

LIVE LONG AND LIKE IT, by C. Ward Crampton, from Public Affairs Pamphlets, 22 East 38th Street, New York 16, New York.

WHEN YOU GROW OLDER, by Lawton and Stewart, from Public Affairs Pamphlets, 22 East 38th Street, New York 16, New York.

WHERE AND WITH WHOM SHOULD OLDER PEOPLE LIVE?, by Gumpert, Haarlov, Havighurst, and Warren, from the University of Chicago Round Table, University of Chicago, Chicago 37, Illinois.

